

Listening Session Guide

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Part One: Ministry that Begins with Listening



The Importance of Listening

As Rev. Dr. Erin Raffety conducted research for her book, *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership* (Baylor, 2022), she studied the experiences of disabled people and their families in church ministry. She found that disabled people were struggling to access church ministry, and especially find a seat at the table in leadership. Some of these stories involved explicit unwelcome and ostracization, but other stories described attempts at inclusion by non-disabled leaders that still didn't prioritize the gifts of disabled people for ministry and leadership (65). Sometimes, these poor experiences caused people with disabilities and their families to leave churches altogether.

However, St. John Chrysostom, a Catholic Parish just outside of Philadelphia, offered an alternative approach for disabled people to share their stories, be listened to, and thus, aid in the process of lament, healing, and transformation. In this resource, we have adapted St. John's approach for other contexts through a practical, adaptive guide. We have conceived of this guide primarily as an opportunity for non-disabled leadership to listen to disabled people's laments about exclusion in church spaces. However, listening sessions could be adapted for many different populations. Another goal of listening sessions is for people in power to inhabit a posture of listening, such that the Spirit may be able to begin moving toward the transformative work of justice.





What is a Listening Session?

A listening session is, simply put, a space for deep, intentional listening. The primary goal of a listening session is to listen to and learn from disabled people, especially people who have been hurt by the church. Instead of focusing on how to fix anything or brainstorm possible solutions to problems, listening is the ministry in itself. A listening session allows church leaders to center the needs of people with disabilities without making any assumptions or having people speak on their behalf. Listening becomes a central form of pastoral care that people who are hurting desperately need, but also a transformative opportunity for the hearers to have their hearts turned to humility and compassion.

Given the Biblical tradition of lament, listening sessions are also deeply faithful. In the Old Testament, the psalms of lament are often called the protests psalms, so central is the work of calling out injustice to these prayers. Furthermore, prophets who lamented injustice in the Bible did not do so in a vacuum. Rather, they distinctly spoke to those in power, pleading with them and with God that they might hear them. Therefore, as people cry out for justice, it is important and faithful work to receive those cries and those prayers, even if they are not our own.

Above all, we put our trust in the Holy Spirit to allow us to listen. Through our listening, we offer others the gift of presence and attune to their emotions and stories. With this in mind, leaders should be cautious about taking notes during these sessions. This is not about data collection. Rather, we're seeking to listen to what the church can learn from the experiences of disabled people. Leaders should not control, critique, or steer the conversation. Instead, church leadership is invited to witness where God is already moving and center the voices of those who ought to be heard. Raffety compares the listening session to that of sitting at the feet of Jesus (68, 85). In doing so, we humble ourselves in service to others and witness God's presence anew.

Part Two: How to Conduct a Listening Session



Initial Considerations:

POWER DYNAMICS

When considering whom to invite, clergy or leaders should not outnumber disabled persons and families.

SAFETY

Without proper precautions, people may not feel comfortable sharing personal stories or being vulnerable. Emphasize trust and appropriate confidentiality before the session begins.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Consider that it may be faithful and necessary to host more than one session if, for example, disabled youth require a separate space from disabled adults or parents to share. Asking participants whom they feel comfortable sharing with and dialoguing with is key for keeping group dynamics positive and manageable.

SPACE

What are ways you can alter the space to make everyone in the group feel prioritized and equal? Ask those whom you plan to listen to where they would be most comfortable meeting in order to be sensitive to their access needs and emotional safety.

Let's begin:

Open in Prayer

The Psalms are a wonderful tool to use during opening and closing prayers, as they offer us, like the Israelites, the freedom to cry out to God. They remind us that “the fullness of our hearts does not make us unfaithful” (84).

A few examples of different types of prayers can be found in Psalms 13, 22, 24, 51, 85, 111, 116, and 130.

Ask Questions

Leaders should pose simple, straightforward questions:

- "What have your experiences of the church been like?"
- "What do you want us to know about you and your family?"
- "What isn't working for you and your family at church right now?"
- "What is working?"
- "What do you wish would change?"
- "What makes it hard to come to church?"

Practice Active Listening

Leaders should listen thoroughly and respond with simple affirmations, such as:

- "Thank you for sharing that."
- "I appreciate what you are sharing."
- "I'm really sorry to hear that was your experience."
- "I'm sad to hear how you've been hurt by the church."
- "I'm sorry that didn't work for you."

Close in Prayer

- If it feels appropriate, you may close the session with another reading from the Psalms.
- It is worth mentioning here that the act of deep listening may also be a form of prayer and sufficient for your group.

Part Three: Adaptive Resource

Listening Sessions with Youth



A listening session with disabled youth allows churches to center the voices of youth thoughtfully. Because every youth ministry context is so different, there is great emphasis on this being an adaptive resource. You know your youth best. We hope that this resource may be flexible enough for you to put your own spin on it to best meet the needs and differences of your unique group.

COMMUNICATION

When it comes to communication, it's important to consider many different communication types. Youth may say things that seem overly critical or drastic. Try not to worry: take this as a compliment that they trust you to tell their truth! Alternatively, some youth may not be able to articulate their emotions or be comfortable talking about their feelings aloud. Still others may not use speech to communicate. We can still listen well to these different communication styles by offering a variety of communication options including journaling or doodling, partner sharing, acting out an experience, or incorporating technology in creative ways to respond to questions. With these alternatives, we need not make assumptions about their needs or have others speak on their behalf.

SAFETY

Safety is an important element of any listening session. When conducting a listening group with youth, safety provides an important foundation that allows youth to be vulnerable and open up more easily. Be transparent about your interest in hosting a listening session and make sure that several trusted adults are present along with you. Remind those in attendance that they can share as much or as little as they are comfortable with. By prioritizing safety, a more fruitful conversation can take place without fear or embarrassment.

POWER DYNAMICS

Additionally, adult leaders should be aware of the power they possess. As we center the voices of young and disabled people, leaders can de-center themselves in service of others. Perhaps youth may feel more comfortable asking one another questions, instead of the adult leading this component of the session. Adults would then only provide affirmative responses, allowing youth to have the conversation amongst themselves with moments of external encouragement.

Wrapping Up

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“THE
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Finally, listening sessions are not “a means to an end; rather, they are the ministry, and therefore there is no effort to move beyond them” (78). The listening session does not rush into a solution to try and fix something. The gift we offer through these sessions is one of humility. This is an opportunity to make space for young people’s sacred, sometimes painful stories without jumping right to a solution. After the session, may you keep listening, keep sitting in patience, and keep holding space where people with disabilities can be heard.

